

BaptistWay Bible Series for July 15: More blessed to give

July 6, 2012

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This quarter of lessons encourages believers to live generously, teaching that giving is the essence of grace. In this week's passage, the Apostle Paul addressed the leaders of the Ephesian church for perhaps the last time (Acts 20:25, 38). His exhortation ended by emphasizing ministering by grace. In this emphasis, Paul revealed an unexpected saying of Jesus which provides our lesson title and a key thought: How is it more blessed to give than to receive?

Verses 17-21 provide Paul's opening statement to the Ephesian elders. First, Paul characterized his ministry among them. Of prime importance was the communication of the gospel. Paul avidly proclaimed the gospel to all listeners, whether Jew or Gentile, and from house to house. The gospel is so powerful it is effective for all people regardless of religious background.

Paul was so concerned about communicating the gospel he willingly proclaimed it in small gatherings. Verse 21 mentions the gospel's core features: repentance and faith in Jesus. These are individual action steps, not group experience steps. Paul taught the gospel publicly and privately. This implies consistency in teaching as well as commitment to bringing the message into lives. The inclusion of house venues indicates that Paul sought to strengthen personal commitments to Christ by ministering to people in the intimate settings of their private lives.

The reason for Paul summoning the Ephesian elders is provided in verses 22-24. Paul was headed to Jerusalem, one of his regular travel objectives.

He had been clearly warned, however, by the Holy Spirit that he faced imprisonment in Jerusalem. Sometimes kingdom service leads one into harm's way. God does not hesitate leading his most faithful servants into mortal situations when the advancement of the gospel can be propelled forward. To be willing to be used by the Lord in such a way is both an advanced Christian character quality and an act of graceful service.

Verse 24 emphasizes Paul's commitment to serving the Lord and completing his God-given tasks. Paul exhorts people to be mindful of the race God has given them in Galatians 5:7 and how one pursues their life of service in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15. Hebrews 12:1 also encourages Christians to run their race carefully. Paul states he has finished his race successfully in 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

The unexpected revelation arrives in verse 25. Paul announces he does not expect to return to Ephesus. The book of Acts never has Paul returning to Ephesus. Some post-Acts reconstructions of Paul's ministry suggest Paul was reunited with the Ephesian church after the Roman imprisonment of Acts 28. If this is true, Paul could not have known it as he addressed the Ephesian elders.

Paul's pending departure meant he must pass the baton of authority. Often, Paul sent a coworker like Timothy to lead a church in his absence. This time, however, Paul turned over the reins to the church elders. Verses 26-27 declare Paul saw his Ephesian ministry coming to an adequate conclusion: he could not be guilty of the lives perished because he had diligently proclaimed God's will (the gospel).

Paul delivered three charges to his listeners in verses 28-31. First, they were to keep watch over themselves and the church ("flock"). Paul uses shepherding terms to communicate intimate involvement in the lives of the people. Second, they were to shepherd the church carefully. The Lord purchased this flock with the steepest of all payments—blood. Third, they

were to guard against savage wolves who would arise from among the leadership and people. The greatest challenges to the unity and health of a congregation often come from within. Therefore, personal involvement in the lives of the people kept the leaders attentive to the disruptive elements that threatened the church.

Of central interest to this lesson are Paul's words in verses 32-35. Paul emphasized ministering by grace by pointing to God's word of grace which refers to the gospel message specifically, but more generally includes all Jesus taught as well as the full message of Scripture. This word of grace sanctifies people and provides them inheritance. In other words, God's word tells how to be rightfully restored to a relationship with God.

Paul emphasized his ministry of grace by declaring he did not pursue payment for his services (v. 33). To rank clothing with gold and silver shows the relative value clothing had in Paul's day. Clothing, even basic everyday attire, was valuable and fully acceptable as payment for services rendered, especially when cash was unavailable.

Nevertheless, Paul not only provided for his own needs but also for his companions so his apostolic ministry would not burden a local congregation. This reveals an astounding insight that when Paul invited coworkers to join him, he helped pay their way! (v. 34).

The principle of a grace-focused ministry is stated in verse 35. This saying of Jesus is not recorded elsewhere. "It is more blessed to give than receive" describes Jesus' earthly ministry and sacrificial death. Giving oneself to others is a central value in God's kingdom. God operates by practices this principle and expects his children to do so also.

How is it more blessed to give than receive? There are many perceptive answers, but the key answer is that God invests his purpose and power in human lives through grace giving. God operates this way, therefore his

people imitate should him.